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Series: It's a Miracle!

Title: Storm Whisperer

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Text: [Matthew 8:23-27](#)

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Today, we wrap up this four-week series in which we've considered a miracle of Jesus each week. We looked in as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding, as he healed a man whose friends destroyed the roof of a house to create a way through the crowd and, and as he was feeding thousands of people with not much food. We wrap up today with Jesus calming a storm and...calming his disciples in the process.

One last time, I'll remind you as to why Jesus performed miracles, and sometimes more than one of those are evident in the miracle:

1. To show compassion and meet human need.
2. To affirm his true identity as the Son of God.
3. To provide us with a glimpse of the world that is to come.

In week one, I asked you to be open to the miraculous in your everyday life. I hope you've been able to identify some things that you might have otherwise missed. They may not be as evident as an outright healing or water turning into wine, but I guarantee, they are there if you are paying attention.

To set the scene for today's miracle, Jesus has been challenging, and perhaps testing, those who are following him to make sure they are committed to this ministry—to make sure they fully understand the risk/reward ratio to really be a follower of Jesus. For us, today is Matthew's turn to tell us a miracle story, and like every other gospel writer we've considered, it is important to place it in context.

In last week's story from Mark, Jesus and the disciples were looking for some time away when they needed to feed 5,000 people. Just prior to our section in Matthew, Jesus had healed many and, again,

desired time away for a time of renewal. He has just finished what we call the “Sermon on the Mount,” and the crowds continue after him. Seeing the crowds, Jesus orders for his disciples to take a boat to go to the other side of the sea. A scribe, one of the Jewish leaders of the time, tells Jesus he will follow him wherever he goes. But Jesus challenges him by telling him that it will not be comfortable to follow him. Another disciple comes to Jesus and tells him that he just needs a short delay and he will follow Jesus. Jesus says he cannot wait until a more convenient time because that time will never come.

Jesus and his disciples now get into the boat to go over to the other side of the sea. Suddenly a great storm comes up on the sea so that the boat is being swamped by the waves. While the boat is being swamped by the waves, Jesus remains asleep in the boat. It is important to note that this is not a huge boat with a downstairs. Jesus is right there, probably tucked up under the cover that was found at the stern of the boat. Now visualize the violence of this storm that is so bad that these men, who are no strangers to being on the water, believe that they are going to die. This is not a little water coming into the boat. These are not small waves. The waves are significant enough that the waves are coming over the boat, filling the boat with water. The disciples rush to Jesus saying, “Lord, save us, we are perishing!”

I think I’ve only been that frightened of a storm once in my life, and that’s saying something for growing up in tornado alley. On our Scout high adventure trip to Philmont Scout Reservation in New Mexico in 2015, a storm rolled in just as we had set up camp. Here we were, miles from anywhere, no cell service, me and the two other adults responsible for my kids and others whose parents weren’t there. All I could think of was the orientation we received about storms before going on the trail that advised us to keep our feet together if we were caught out in lightning and couldn’t take shelter. That way the current would flow across our feet rather than coming up through our body. They didn’t mention sitting on the floor of a tent. I was pretty sure we were dead. I had everyone squat in their tent, feet together, but “Lord, save us, we are perishing!” was not far from my lips.

The response of Jesus is a telling part of our story. He does not wake up, look around, and say, “Wow! Things are really out of control out here!” Jesus is not surprised. Jesus is not concerned. The disciples wake Jesus up, and Jesus says to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” What an amazing question! Why are you afraid? We are afraid because the boat is filling with water. We are afraid because the waves are crashing over the boat. We are afraid because a great storm has stirred up, and we are going to drown. We’re afraid because there’s lightning all around, and I didn’t pay close enough attention in the hike orientation. We have all kinds of reasons to be afraid.

Remember where we started. Just before this, Jesus was telling those who will follow him that it wouldn’t be easy. Here are disciples who are willing to go across the sea with him. These are disciples who said they are willing to leave, willing to be uncomfortable, and willing to go with Jesus immediately. But will you follow Jesus even when you are afraid? Just because you are with Jesus does not mean that you will not experience terrifying trials. Storms are going to come that are going to test you. Jesus is not making it easy for these disciples. A severe storm is swamping their boat.

New Testament scholar and theologian N.T. Wright observes, “The sea has always been a symbol of wild untamable power.” This was true for most cultures. But the people of Israel especially didn’t care much for the water. As Wright says further, “The sea remained, in Jewish writing, a place and a power of darkness and evil, threatening and wild.”¹ Now who could control the world’s waters? Certainly, no person. Only the gods. Or in Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We can go back to the very beginning, when God takes that chaos, those waters, and turns it into cosmos, to order, when God makes the heavens and the earth. Or think back to the Exodus, when the waters of the Red Sea stand before the people of God and God parts those waters and the Israelites walk right on through.

Jesus got up and rebuked the winds and the waves. Then there was a great calm. The story ends with the response of the men in the boat. “They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’” (Matthew 8:27). They are observing Jesus’ extraordinary power and authority. There is a beautiful picture of the complete power of Jesus. First, there was a great storm. Then, there is a great calm on the sea. It is the same Greek word in both places. Jesus has the power to bring great calm; our version says, “a dead calm.”

It is indeed a miracle but what are we to do with this, or any other of Jesus’ miracles? I think the application for us today is as important as understanding what it meant then. It’s an easy step from the storm in the boat to the storms we experience in life today.

Let me share five things about real storms that are present in our real-life storms as well. I know, I know, sermons are only supposed to have three points but this story has more, so this sermon has more. Those who have lived through storms of their own know these five things intimately, but I think it helps to name them so we can talk about them and find support from others when they happen.²

1. Storms can happen suddenly. In the days before 10-day advance forecasts on The Weather Channel app on your phone, storms were much more of a surprise. But we know that in our own lives, too. Storms come up suddenly even when we think we are prepared. These men with Jesus were experienced, and they were surprised. We think we’re ready for anything, and we’re surprised. That’s the way life is. One moment you are doing fine and the next the bottom falls out. One phone call and you find yourself in the middle of a storm. One doctor’s visit and you are in a storm. One conversation and you are in a storm.

2. Storms can cause you to doubt God. It’s one thing to learn something about God or yourself while sitting in a church service; it’s another thing to learn something about God and yourself when you lose a

¹ N.T. Wright quote found in: “Shipwreck and Kingdom: Acts and the Anglican Communion,” the closing address to the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, 2005 found at www.ntwrightpage.com.

² Inspiration for four of the five found in sermon by Jeff Stott titled, Jesus: Calming the Storm based on Mark 4:35-41 from November 13, 2020 found at <https://truthappliedjs.com/>

loved one, you are let go at work, when you can't afford your bills anymore, when your health begins to leave you or when your marriage falls apart. Some lessons can only be learned in the middle of the storm. The storms in life will cause you to doubt God.

3. Storms don't respond to panic. Have you noticed that panicking rarely, if ever, helps a situation? Almost always, when learning about how to respond in an emergency situation, the first rule on the list is "Don't Panic." It's what gets taught on one of my favorite days in our preschool—when Casey the fire dog comes to teach kids about fire protocol. Jesus didn't panic. Before calming the storm, Jesus calms those in the boat, asks why they are afraid. What does their fear have to do with their lack of faith? Think about what Jesus is challenging. In your most fearful situation, are you willing to maintain your faith and continue to follow him? Usually these are the times that shake us away from following Jesus the most often. When life is really hard and you feel like you are under threat, this is when we want to take matters into our own hands.

4. Storms can teach you about God. Mark's gospel actually has Jesus verbally commanding the waves. There he says, "Be silent! Be still!" The way Jesus rebuked the wind may be an indication of who was behind the storm. This rebuke by Jesus is the same rebuke Jesus gave a demon who he encountered in a man in the synagogue in Capernaum earlier. He told the demon to "Be silent and come out of him." The demon obeyed, the storm obeyed. There are a lot of lessons we can learn about God in the middle of a storm if we choose to pay attention.

5. Storms can teach you about yourself and stretch your faith. Their concern about drowning was normal and reasonable. Jesus' rebuke and question about their fear versus their faith is not about their concern of drowning, which was legitimate. His rebuke is not about their reaction to the storm, but their reaction to JESUS in the storm. They questioned his love and concern for them. This is the temptation when we become afraid. Because of the storm in our life, we see God as less than God is and we doubt God's love and care for us. Sometimes, we even scream out, "Where are you O God?"

The disciples, still learning about this man, had their faith increased that day. Matthew says it like this: "They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" (Matthew 8:27). Up to this point, the disciples knew Jesus was special and unique and that God was working through Him. Prophets of the past had performed various miracles like healing the sick, cleansing lepers, but this seemed different. This is the type of power reserved for God alone.

Here is the truth of life, perhaps the very definition of life. You are either headed into a storm, in the middle of a storm, or coming out of one. Learn from your storms. God is teaching you something—something about God, something about you, something about how to navigate the next one. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what the storm is all about. You will see Jesus differently, and you will see yourself differently. There are some things you can only learn in a storm. Not all storms come to disrupt your life; some come to clear a path. Some storms help you to see some things more clearly.

The faith to follow even through fear comes by seeing who we are following. To put it another way, it is much easier to have faith in Jesus when we are not afraid about our future and fearful about life. I want to end with a portion of the 107th Psalm that has given comfort to people for centuries:

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. (Psalm 107:23-30)

“Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.” That is my prayer for you, for me, for us.